

Moral Dimensions of American Military Strategy
U.S. Army War College
13th Annual Strategy Conference

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Key Insights:

- International law and the law of war may be used against the United States.
- A new emphasis on precision weapons brings increased (and perhaps unrealistic) expectations of riskless war.
- The rapidly changing and complex security environment requires strategic leaders with firm ethical foundations.
- Western values do not govern international behavior, although some may argue that universal values may override cultural and ethical differences.

The U.S. Army War College sponsored a major conference to examine the many issues and questions surrounding the moral and ethical dimensions involved with the development and execution of American national security strategy from April 9-11, 2002. The conference brought together at Carlisle Barracks over 150 American and foreign academic, business, government, media, and military representatives. For 3 days, the panelists and audience participated in provocative discussion and debate examining this timely issue-especially appropriate considering the September 11th attacks. The conference focused on five general themes: the law of war and conflict, "riskless" war, developing ethical strategic leaders, ethical asymmetry and cultural clashes, and future ethical challenges to national security strategy. This brief summary highlights some of the most important issues and concerns that arose during the conference.

Law of War and Modern Conflict.

This panel consisted of three panelists: Colonel Charles Dunlap, Staff Judge Advocate, U.S. Air Force; Mr. Hays Parks, Special Assistant to the Judge Advocate General, U.S. Army; and Dr. Peter McGuire, author and military analyst. Colonel Thomas McShane, Director of National Security Legal Studies, U.S. Army War College, served as panel moderator. The panelists' papers highlighted and discussed significant developments in the law of war that promise to challenge policymakers and warriors alike in contemporary and future operations. These range from efforts to misapply the law of war to secure tactical, operational, or strategic advantage over the United States and other Western nations to trends restricting the development and use of technologically-advanced weapons.

The panel also discussed a variety of topics including: the emphasis on international tribunals to try war criminals over the course of the past decade; the failure of the international community to intervene to prevent atrocities and mass murder; lack of enforcement of laws of war; and the rise in noncombatant casualties and blurring of distinction between soldiers and civilians in many of the ethnic, intrastate conflicts. The panel discussed how future opponents may seek to use U.S. compliance with the law of armed conflict against the United States by

using human shields, placing military objects in or near protected places, and other such illegal acts. The resulting civilian casualties and destruction of private property would erode international and perhaps even domestic support for military action. This cynical use of international law and the law of war is referred to as "lawfare."

Riskless War.

This panel consisted of four panelists: Admiral Leighton "Snuffy" Smith, U.S. Navy (Retired), former NATO commander in Bosnia; Dr. Joel Rosenthal, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs; Dr. Paul Kahn, Yale University; and Mr. David Rieff, World Policy Institute. Dr. Martin Cook, Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, U.S. Army War College, served as panel moderator. These participants discussed the interest in recent years concerning the great and growing gap between the capabilities of the military forces of the United States and any potential adversary—and allies. The combined effects of precision munitions, stealth technology, intelligence capabilities, and the raw power of defenses pending have rendered U.S. forces overwhelmingly superior to all others. One consequence is that the United States is capable of engaging in what some commentators call "riskless" or even "casual" war.

Given the enormously unequal military capability of the United States and any potential coalition partners, the panel discussed whether "political coalitions" might be prudent, rather than attempting to cobble together disparate military forces (and the political complexity coalitions bring with them). Concerning the U.S. capability of striking with precision standoff munitions, the possibility that the threshold to the use of force has been lowered was debated. Perhaps the current asymmetrical military capabilities have eliminated old guideposts to moral deliberation. If future killing is not accompanied by risk, the moral permission to do so may also have been rendered irrelevant. The panel examined the issue of soldiers being trained for peace enforcement, and the possible muddying of categories between armed military interventions and policing in a civil society. The panel pointed out that such a shift in policy may raise more moral challenges than it resolves.

Developing Ethical Strategic Leaders.

This panel consisted of three panelists: Major General (Retired) Clay Buckingham; Mr. David Brooks, Weekly Standard; Dr. Don Snider, U.S. Military Academy; and Dr. Albert Pierce, U.S. Naval Academy. Dr. Leonard Wong, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, served as panel moderator. Because of the rapidly changing security environment and the unclear ethical boundaries of the future, it is important that future strategic leaders have firm ethical underpinnings. Much of the discussion concerning such leaders did not address the ethical considerations in developing the national strategy, but instead focused on either the development of ethical leaders or the Interface between uniformed and civilian leaders.

The panel examined the issue of ensuring that future strategic leaders possess the moral foundations required in the complex future. One panelist proposed that despite hand wringing over an indulgent society that seems to be depriving U.S. youth of character building experiences, today's youth are indeed developing virtue as they struggle in an achievement oriented society. Another panelist's view held that character comes from an inner compass derived from the U.S. Judeo-Christian heritage. Yet another approach looked to the schoolhouse to develop an ethical foundation. The answer, of course, is most likely a mixture of all these.

One often-overlooked aspect of ethical strategic leaders is their role in maintaining the profession. Internally, leaders must provide ethical leadership for the profession, not just the organization. This includes developing the next generation of leaders and keeping the profession's level of expert knowledge high. Externally, strategic leaders must walk the ethical tightrope of being subordinated to, yet giving military advice to civilian leaders.

Ethical Asymmetry and Cultural Clashes.

This panel consisted of four panelists: Dr. David Pinault, Santa Clara University; Dr. Stuart Cohen, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies; Mr. Nicolas de Torrente, Médecins Sans Frontières USA; and Mr. Ted Gong, Department of State. Dr. Conrad Crane, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, served as panel moderator. It was very clear from this panel that Western values do not always govern international behavior. This can present a dilemma for soldiers bound by high moral codes in a war against terrorism. What are perceived as immoral attacks seem to merit a similar response, but the resulting process of brutalization can corrode armies and societies. Israel faces that dilemma today, as it is often perceived as an island of Western culture in a sea of Islam. Interpretations of the life of Mohammed and inflammatory passages from the Koran have been used by militant Moslems to support attacks against perceived infidels for centuries. Though there are many peaceful elements of Islam, its tradition of community solidarity and a different concept of human rights than the humanistic, Western one complicates those who want to foster more humanistic forms. Even if other non-Western countries, like China, appear to act sometimes in accordance with traditional Just War Theory, their motivations actually arise from different cultural and political roots. And while these unique characteristics might limit beginning wars, they provide few restraints on combat once it starts.

However, humanitarian agencies believe that fundamental universal values override cultural and ethical differences. In this view, all humans want safety, a decent standard of living, and freedom to conduct their own affairs. Such nongovernmental organizations decry the use of the word "humanitarian" to justify military operations that are essentially political interventions, and also are concerned about military involvement with real assistance programs that endangers the perceived neutrality of other groups. So strategists face a number of different cultural and ethical asymmetries as they try to shape policies and operations.

Ethical Challenges of Future Strategy.

This panel consisted of three panelists: Mr. Robert Maginnis, Family Research Council; Professor Nadine Strossen, American Civil Liberties Union; and Lieutenant General John Le Moyne, U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1. Professor Douglas Lovelace of the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, moderated the panel. Additionally, several other key speakers addressed the ethical challenges in developing future strategy throughout the conference—Dr. Anthony Cordesman, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Michael Ignatieff of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; and Professor William Eckhardt, University of Missouri-Kansas City. All discussed what they saw as impending strategic moral issues.

These discussions proved to be more provocative since they sought to surface emerging challenges—many of which could not be thoroughly addressed during the conference. The audience and speakers grappled with the ability of the American culture to develop character,

the accountability of Special Forces working with proxy armies, the impact of counterterrorism domestic policies, and the perception of the United States by other nations. These speakers questioned the ability of U.S. society to produce citizens with enough ethical foundations to man the military; wondered if the Northern Alliance had committed an atrocity, who would have been responsible; and asked how far the Nation goes to get information from its own citizens. These questions were considered, debated, and added to the "think about later" file of many of the conference participants.

Conclusions.

The 13th Annual Strategy Conference examined the "Moral Dimensions of American Military Strategy." Interestingly, the focus of the conference was developed in the Spring of 2001-many months before the United States was thrust into a new war on September 11th. After the attack on America, the conference took on a new urgency. Indeed, many of the issues raised in this conference are still being played out throughout the world. The world is now a more complex place with U.S. national security strategy pushing the limits of existing policies. The conference provided an excellent opportunity to identify and discuss many of the moral and ethical considerations involved in this new security environment. The conference, however, was only one part in the continuing discussion of the moral dimensions of American military strategy. It is now up to defense policymakers, academics, and senior leaders to continue that discussion.

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